



CHILDREN OF COLOR ORGANIZATION, INC.

15 Lewis Street · Hartford, CT 06112 · (860) 726-6504 ·

childrenofcolor2009@hotmail.com ~ www.childrenofcolor.org

It takes a village to raise a child, one family at a time.

Testimony in Support of
HB 5221: A "Second Look" at Lengthy Prison Sentences Imposed on Children
Giselle Jacobs
Connecticut Sentencing Commission
March 3, 2014

I am testifying today on behalf of Children of Color Organization, Inc. and the Breaking the Cycle ~ Empowering Families Support Group, a grassroots community organization committed to breaking the cycle of criminal and addictive behavior that passes down from generation to generation and eliminating the over-representation of African Americans and Latinos in the justice system.

We are a group of ordinary people who have been impacted by the judicial system, whether from our own personal experience, loved one or friend. We meet on the 1st and 3rd Tuesday on the North End of Hartford, and the 3rd Thursday on the South End of Hartford and in addition to that we have become a powerful vehicle that the community have come to rely on as a source of referrals and advocacy.

We urge the commission to enact HB 5221 that would ensure that courts consider youth-related factors in sentencing children and provide these children an second chance. I can't help but think about the tremendous amount of youth entering the juvenile justice system with unaddressed mental health issues. And some of us parents just don't know what we don't know. The National Alliance on Mental Health states that without adequate community services many of our youth will end up in the criminal justice system.

Speaking from my own personal experience: I got my first boyfriend in the 6th grade, not because I wanted one, but because I needed protection. We'd moved back to Bellevue Square after having left years prior and I was an only child and terrified. My mother was dealing with her own issues of substance abuse, domestic violence and incarceration that went hand and hand with most households in my environment. I had a son at 15 and by age 16, I was in my own apartment, attending high school and working part-time. My son's father never moved in with us because by then we were already fighting more often than not. Although my apartment was on Wooster St, a block away from where he lived in Bellevue Square with his mom, and his not living with us did not stop him from getting a job and helping with his son. He would give me his paycheck and I would go shopping and dress us up like triplets. That's all we knew, to dress up the outside. We didn't know that all the fighting was traumatizing our son. We didn't know that witnessing his mother and father in an altercation that caused one of his parents to end up with 2 collapsed lungs, blood all over the kitchen walls and floors, nanna thrown down on the floor and helpless was desensitizing him to violence. We didn't know that breaking up was not the only solution, our son should have gotten counseling. However, my solution was to join the military. If I join the military I'll be able to give my son a better life. The recruiter told me that after Basis Training and Advanced Individual Training it would be like a regular job. I would be able to have my son with me. Well that did not happen. After training I was given a 2 day pass to fly to Hartford and put my 5yr old son on a plane to Florida to be with my father's mother and was sent overseas. Two and a half years later as I was stationed back stateside in Virginia, I took my son to Walter Reid Hospital and was informed that he had been losing blotches of hair because he was traumatized due tour separation. A few months later I received my Honorable Discharge and life then became about surviving after life in the military. My focus was on getting a job and housing, not on following up with getting my son into counseling. I believe my neglecting to get him the help he so desperately needed then, is why by age 12 he began making decisions that would cause him to spend the next 15 plus years behind bars. I didn't know what I didn't know. Now that I now, I have a duty to inform young parents in my community that they don't have to make the same mistakes I did.

A few weeks ago our funders decided that they could no longer support the work we are doing in the community with the support groups and outreach. And I came close to throwing in the towel, and then I was reminded of my humble beginning. Just a few short years ago, I was working at a homeless shelter in Manchester and living in the Soromundi Homeless shelter for women in Hartford, after first having been at the South Park Inn and Interval House for Battered Women. Even while homeless I was able to encourage other women in the shelter to volunteer in the community, attend city council meetings and do what we could to make a difference. Breaking the Cycle's first support group was held in my living room and I brought the dinner with my food stamps. We may have lost our funding, but we have not lost our faith. I have a group of committed volunteers who have continued to show up whenever asked, whether it was to sit on a panel at CHDI in Hamden or to be filmed by a producer out of New York to assist in a production that would educate parents in jails across the country. We are truly a People of Purpose who will Persevere. And again, we encourage you to support the recommendations of HB 5221 and give these children a chance to show that they can change.

Research has found that young people are less culpable and more amenable to rehabilitation because of their immaturity and now that we know this, we have a responsibility and duty to pass House Bill 5221.

Thank you,

Giselle Jacobs